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Visions of light and landscape, in painting and print

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The new work of Bay Area painter Robin McDonnell conforms to an elemental definition of her art: moving paint around a surface. From that rude ground she unearths a marvelous and ever-shifting variety of detail and ad hoc coherence.

For centuries painters in the Western tradition have relied on the suggestive power of their material itself. The best of them make that potential seem indistinguishable from their skill in handling it.

In the oil sketches of an 18th century painter such Giambattista Tiepolo we already see a kind of faith in the capacity of paint itself to disgorge images with less and less coercion by the artist.

Nineteenth century Romantic painters such as Eugène Delacroix and J. M. W. Turner exploited an evolving predisposition among the art viewers of their day to read detail and meaning into very sketchily articulated passages.

So did anti-Romantic contemporaries as different as Édouard Manet and William Harnett. Mid-20th century greats -- Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell and others -- extended the limits of viewers' willingness to coalesce with their eyes the details of paintings with little or no manifest composition.

McDonnell works at the end of this ancestry where improvisational painting as an exercise in authenticity risks looking nostalgic but all the possibilities of painting appear to be instinct in the material itself, at least under a knowing hand.

McDonnell has that, to judge by her current show. In each picture she sets color in motion, working wet into wet with palette knives or other bladed tools, bringing a picture surface to a pitch of agitation that renders initial moves and revisions inextricable.

Images and the makings of imagery seem to precipitate unbidden out of "Event -- Blue" (2006), and other pictures on view. The art in such pieces consists as much in the painter knowing when to stop as knowing how and how long to drag paint around.

McDonnell's work drives toward sensations of the eye enjoying itself, feeling its power to resolve ambiguities but freed from the need to use it. In this sense, McDonnell's art answers to the needs of a driven culture.

Robin McDonnell: Flux Constant: paintings. Through March 31. Brian Gross Fine Art, 49 Geary